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Latin America

Higher education in a lost decade

Simon Schwartzman

The lost decade

The 1980s will be remembered in Latin America as the lost decade. Almost without exception, all countries faced political deterioration, economic stagnation, worsening living conditions, and cultural perplexity. The feeling in the early 1990s is that all roads have been travelled, all possibilities tested, and nothing really worked. In the 1950s and 1960s it was still possible to put the blame on the local oligarchies and their international allies, and hope that a new era could be produced through increasing political mobilization and participation. In many countries, populism led to military regimes, which begot revolutionary guerrillas, which in turn begot military repression and widespread violence. As the military regimes exhausted their cycles, they were replaced by shaky and unconvincing democracies, unable to control their budgets, check corruption and face the mounting pro-

blems of economic obsolescence and urban decay.

Economic stagnation shook a central tenet of past decades, that progress would inevitably follow social and economic modernization. No region modernized so rapidly in the last twenty years as Latin America. Almost everywhere, traditional agriculture was replaced by mechanized agro-industries, and the rural population flocked to the cities. Mass communications reached every corner, spreading the language, consumption patterns and values of urban life. Improvement of basic health conditions led to a dramatic fall in infant mortality and a large increase in life expectancy, resulting in a population explosion that is only now slowing down through generalized access to birth-control devices. Education, even if still not universal, reaches more people, proportionally, than it ever did, from basic to graduate levels. Latin America is very unequal, and many countries and regions still face the traditional problems of rural poverty, illiteracy and lack of access to basic health and sanitary services. But the problems of the 1990s are very modern: urban overcrowding, environmental pollution, poor education, mass culture, youth unemployment, organized crime, urban violence, drug and alcohol abuse, alienation, swollen public bureaucracies and the growing inability of established governments to deal with these problems.

The key question is whether the lost decade was just a transitional period or will remain as a permanent fixture of Latin American societies. The current crisis affects some countries and regions more than others, and some authors are

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beginning to distinguish between 'viable' and 'non-viable' countries, believing that the latter are facing the same processes of economic, social and political degradation that affect so many sub-Saharan African countries. This may prove true in some extreme cases, but it is in an unacceptable simplification. To replace the old, naïve belief in economic development and progress with wholesale pessimism and gloom will not lead very far. A much closer look at past and present experiences is needed, to find out not only why so many hopes and projects have failed, but also why others seem to work better, and to point toward more positive roads.

Higher education is just one element of this broad picture, and its recent changes and current dilemmas cannot be understood without the full picture of the lost decade in our minds. There would be no point in looking at higher education in detail, however, if we took it as just another instance of a picture of global pessimism. Our assumption is the opposite. In spite of its obvious difficulties, higher education is one among other areas in which there are still opportunities to be explored, and hopes to be found for a broad, positive role in the region's predicaments.

The origins

Latin American higher education, as it exists today, was organized during the period of independence, in the early nineteenth century, grew slowly for about 150 years, went through a period of explosive growth in the 1960s and 1970s, and levelled off again in the 1980s. Before independence, where they existed, higher education institutions were run by the Catholic Church of the Counter Reformation, as part of the Spanish colonizing enterprise. The struggle for political independence was coloured by the ideals of secularism, the appreciation for technical knowledge, and a general attack on the traditional university institutions.

Throughout, the rhetoric was about tradi-

tion and present times, scholastic and practical knowledge, general and professional education, the colonial tradition and the building of modern nation-states. Universities were a natural place for these confrontations to take place. Conservative and liberals, Catholics and positivists fought each other through the following century, creating new public institutions, closing down Catholic universities, opening them up again, supporting them with public money or cutting off their lifelines. In Mexico the Catholic universities disappeared, in Chile the two coexisted, in Brazil the Catholic institutions appeared only in the 1940s, in Argentina still later.

Political independence did not mean much in terms of social and economic transformations. Enlightened Latin American élites spoke French, travelled to Europe and handled French concepts, including their democratic and rationalist ideals; yet, their societies remained restricted to the limits of their economies, based on a few export products, large pockets of traditional or decadent settlements, one or two major administrative and export centres, and, in Brazil, a slavery system that lasted almost to the end of the nineteenth century. There were not many jobs requiring specialized knowledge and skills, except for handling the tangled legal systems inherited from Iberian baroque legislation, for military work and health care. Law, military engineering and medicine were main fields of study, none of them demanding enough to put special premium on innovation and achievement.

To the prevalence of rhetoric, feeble intellectual and technical competence and reduced social impact, should be added centralization and bureaucratic control. There was a matter of symmetry, new states organizing their educational institutions against the centralizing traditions of the past; then, most of the education business dealt with bestowing honours, titles and privileges, rather than with knowledge as such, formal goods that can only exist if regulated from above. More generally, the whole colonial enterprise, both in Portuguese and Spanish America, was carried on through centralized

authority and control, and the local élites did not know otherwise.

Centralization did not go unchecked. The landmark of the reaction was the student rebellion at the University of Córdoba, Argentina, in 1918, which led to joint academic governance by faculty, students and alumni. The Córdoba movement – the *Reforma* – soon spread its word throughout the continent, leading to the adoption of similar governance rules in national universities in most countries. The *Reforma* movement was incendiary in its rhetoric against the university establishment but conservative in its accomplishments. Where it succeeded universities became less subject to daily interferences from central government, but did not incorporate new social groups nor improve the quality of teaching. Self-governance meant that decisions had to be taken by vote, and no place could exist for institutional leadership. It is not a coincidence that the *Reforma* started in Córdoba, an Argentine province that was declining in face of the intense economic and political growth of Buenos Aires. Even where economic development did not occur, cities were growing, populations increased, and traditional power arrangements were difficult to maintain. The Latin American reformed universities became the place where the children of the traditional élites expressed their frustrations against the decadence of their elders, and their hopes for the future.

In the early 1960s, the contrasts between the modernization drives of Latin American societies and the narrowness of their political regimes led to intensified political activism, followed by unprecedented levels of repression. Political repression came from the confrontation of student, and sometimes teacher, activism against the military regimes that emerged more or less at that time in many countries: Argentina after 1966, Brazil at first in 1964, but intensifying in 1969; Chile in 1973; not forgetting the massacre of students in Mexico City of 1968. For the military, at the beginning, the problems of higher education were a matter of police and discipline. With different emphasis in one place or another, elected rectors were replaced by colo-

nels, teachers were dismissed, students arrested, the social sciences were banned, mandatory civic education was introduced. Large sectors of the universities were destroyed and demoralized, while hundreds of students took up guerrilla warfare. The cycles of expansion, repression and insurrection came together to their end in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was then time to pick up the pieces, see what remained of higher education from the past years and decide what could be done about it. By then political mobilization of students had lost its virulence, to be replaced by the unionization of teachers and employees. In most public institutions the traditional part-time professor had been replaced by a new professional, the full-time teacher (who had been very often the militant student of ten years before) and sometimes by the academically oriented researcher, educated abroad and expecting his institution to become like the research university where he received his degree. Most military regimes had by then disappeared, but a new scourge was already looming – economic stagnation.

The uncertain future

Published in 1983, Juan Carlos Tedesco's study of the tendencies and perspectives of development of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean is an unsurpassed gathering and organization of the available information, and a reasoned and scholarly reflection on why higher education reached the problems and difficulties it faced. Following Tedesco's study, it is possible to travel in time from the traditional élitist Latin American universities to the current mass education systems, and see how the traditional interpretation of Latin American universities as training grounds for political élites gave way, after the 1950s, to the human-capital approach, which was replaced, in turn, by a much more sceptical view of its role in socio-economic development and modernization. We can trace the evolution from the times when reformed and ex-

panded universities were expected to become landmarks of democratization, to a time when education came to be perceived as little else than the reproduction and consolidation of old patterns of social stratification and social inequality; the transition from a period of optimism about the academic communities' ability to find their own ways on the road of competence and social relevance, if given enough freedom and resources, to a reluctant return to the need of governmental planning and oversight.

Expansion

Tedesco (1983) starts by showing the extraordinary expansion of higher education in Latin America since the 1960s, coinciding with the growth of urban centres and the replacement of

the old oligarchic political regimes with different systems of mass politics, in alternation with periods of authoritarian rule. Writing on the same subject a few years later, Winkler (1990, p. xii) noted that

higher education enrolments in Latin America increased tenfold between 1960 and 1985, resulting in levels of access approaching those found in many industrialized countries. Private institutions absorbed more than their share of this growth and now represent one-third of total enrolments in the region.

The expansion is to be explained by broad social and political trends, and was stimulated by the huge wage differentials that still exist in Latin America across educational levels. In 1950, only Uruguay, Argentina and Cuba had around 5 per cent of the age group enrolled in universities; in 1980 only Honduras, Guatemala and Haiti had less than 10 per cent. Table 1 gives the picture for the whole region in the middle of the 1980s.

In no country was this growth the product of government planning or decision. In all regions, expansion was related to the massive incorporation of women in higher education, and led to the prevalence of 'soft' fields of knowledge, like the social sciences and humanities, over the traditional careers of law, medicine and engineering. It came also from older people hoping to improve their educational credentials and gain access to, or promotion in, public jobs in the region's expanding public bureaucracies. For the first time, most of the students came from families with no previous experience of higher education.

In their drive for higher education, students got into the careers they could, rather than to those they preferred. The predominance of the social sciences and humanities stems from their lower costs and less demanding academic requirements, not by a sudden preference of young Latin Americans for such topics. But it was compatible with large increases in tertiary occupations that were occurring at the time, typical of Latin American modernization. While the countries' economies supported it, expansion of higher education was largely financed

TABLE 1. Enrolment in higher education in Latin America, 1985

Country	Enrolment	Women (%)	rate ¹
Argentina	846 141	53	36.4
Bolivia	95 052	—	19.0
Brazil	1 479 397	48	11.3
Colombia	391 490	49	13.0
Costa Rica	63 771	58	23.0
Cuba	235 224	54	21.4
Chile	197 437	43	15.9
Dominican Republic	123 748	—	19.3
Ecuador	277 799	39	33.1
El Salvador	70 499	44	13.8
Guatemala	48 283	—	8.4
Haiti	6 289	—	1.1
Honduras	30 632	42	9.6
Mexico	1 207 779	36	15.7
Nicaragua	29 001	56	9.8
Panama	55 303	56	25.9
Paraguay	33 203	—	9.7
Peru	443 640	35	23.8
Uruguay	87 707	—	35.8
Venezuela	347 618	—	26.4

1. Higher education enrolment as percentage of the population in the 20-24 age bracket, for 1985 or the closest available year.
Source: Brunner, 1990; based on UNESCO, 1988.

TABLE 2. World expenditure on education, 1975-85

Year	Total (\$ millions)	% of GNP	Per cap- ita (\$)
<i>World total</i>			
1975	330 117	5.5	84
1980	618 195	5.5	144
1985	681 195	5.6	144
<i>Developing countries</i>			
1975	40 433	3.6	14
1980	93 384	3.9	29
1985	95 846	4.1	27
<i>Latin America and the Caribbean</i>			
1975	13 477	3.5	43
1980	31 397	3.9	88
1985	25 392	3.8	63

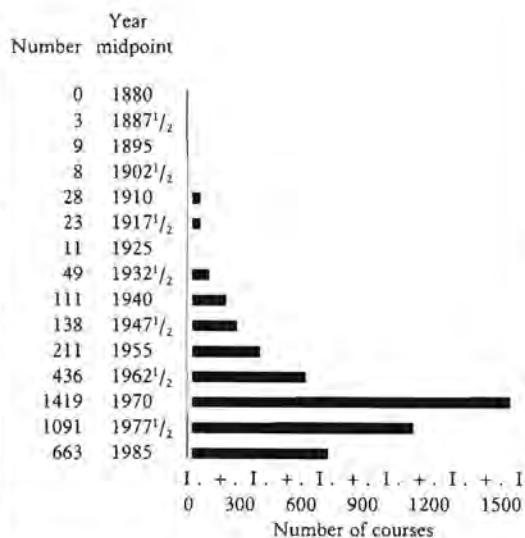
Source: Brunner, 1990, based on UNESCO, 1988.

from taxation, and university-level employment was provided by an expanding public sector and by the creation of professional privileges for the holders of educational credentials.

Economic stagnation in the 1980s caught educational expansion at full speed, constraining the job market, limiting the universities' budgets and causing widespread perplexity and frustration (see Table 2). The problem was aggravated by the time it took for the education sector to react to economic expectations. Data from Brazil show that the creation of new courses peaked in the early and mid 1970s, reflecting the economic expansion of those years, and was still going strong in the 1980s, when the signs of crisis were already visible (Fig. 1).

Differentiation

One effect of expansion was the development of a large private sector, which in some countries, such as Brazil and Colombia, accounts now for more than half of current enrolments, and reaches about a third of the enrolments in the region. The growth of private higher education is



Valid cases: 4,200

Without information: 100

FIG. 1. Number of higher-education courses created by year in Brazil (by 7.5-year intervals). After: ME/SEEC, 1988.

the subject of a book by Daniel Levy, for whom private institutions have 'remolded the relationship between higher education and society's multiple classes, groups, interests, and they have remolded the relationship between higher education and the State' (Levy, 1986, p. 334). This is the more visible, but by no means the only differentiation that took place in recent years: universities have become internally stratified, non-university sectors have grown in many countries, and significant regional decentralization occurred everywhere.

The issue of public versus private education has its roots in colonial times, when the only universities in the continent were those organized by the Catholic Church, in close alliance with the Spanish Crown. Political independence, in the early nineteenth century, led to the establishment of secular higher-education institutions, usually based on the Napoleonic model of state-controlled professional 'faculties' or schools. Levy gives the details of this transformation. By the end of the colonial period,

Spanish America had about twenty-five universities (the Portuguese, however, always refused to establish higher-education institutions in Brazil). A century later, only Colombia and Chile had private Catholic universities (Levy, 1986, pp. 28–32). In the 1930s the Church moved to recover its role in higher education, trying in some cases to re-establish its association with the state, as in Colombia and Brazil (see Levine, 1981; Schwartzman et al., 1984) or, more frequently, creating their independent institutions. Catholic universities were to provide the students with the traditional religious, moral and humanistic education they thought the public universities neglected, and in their defence of educational freedom they joined hands, unwillingly, with the liberal students who, starting with the Córdoba movement, unfolded the banner of university autonomy from the state.

The second wave of privatization, following Levy's chronology, was a backlash from sectors of Latin American élites against the deterioration of public education. As the public universities absorbed the growing demand for higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, they changed from an élite to a predominantly middle-class constituency, their academic standards deteriorated and they became the focus of permanent political agitation. In many countries the élites decided to move away to their exclusive institutions, a role taken up by Catholic institutions, newly created private universities or special élite institutions established with government support.

The third wave happened mostly in response to situations where the public sector did not open widely enough to absorb the demand for large quantity, low-quality mass education. Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Peru are the major examples. The new institutions kept their costs down by paying their teachers by the hour, teaching in the 'soft' fields where no special equipment and technical support was needed, opening evening classes for working students, and packing them into large classrooms.

With expansion and privatization, higher education remained homogeneous horizontally

but became increasingly stratified vertically. Expansion could be expected to lead to different institutions doing different things, responding to the varying needs of different people. However, this tendency tended to be checked by strong pressures for equal rights and status to all educated persons, which resulted at the end in increased, if barely disguised, forms of discrimination. Horizontal homogeneity came from a blurring of the frontiers between religious and lay, public and private, technical and professional institutions, careers and courses. Today in Latin America few students go to Catholic universities through religious conviction, and few Catholic institutions manage, or even try, to infuse their students with the religious and moral teachings that led to their organization as independent entities. Direct and indirect public subsidies to private institutions, on one hand, and the administrative autonomy, the ability to raise money and even to charge tuition in public universities, on the other, make the distinction between public and private less straightforward than in the past. A final convergence is among what could be considered 'university proper' institutions and those like teachers' colleges, technical institutes and vocational schools. In the past, as in Europe, higher education was the privilege of the few, with a narrow access path provided by education in the liberal arts or in basic sciences, to be obtained at secondary school. Now, in most countries, any secondary-school diploma can lead to university, and no course programme taught at the tertiary level, from medicine to nutrition, from economics to hotel management, from physics to production engineering, can be denied 'university' status.

Horizontal homogeneity has not led to more equality, but to increased stratification: there is little incentive for less prestigious careers like teaching and technical work, and extremely high rates of failure and frustration in the competition for the most prestigious degrees, now supposedly accessible to all. Where, in the past, a secondary-school diploma was an achievement, today anything less than a four-year university degree is a failure. Careers and institutions are strongly stratified and socially se-

lective, whether it be in Brazil, where difficult entrance exams screen out the less qualified students from the more prestigious careers, or in Argentina, where there is a policy of open admission, but the less qualified students are screened out after one or two years of schooling.

Efficiency, equity and costs

Latin American higher education is in obvious need of improvement, and evaluations and proposals abound. The issues of efficiency, equity and costs are the central concerns of the discussion paper prepared by Donald R. Winkler (1990) for the World Bank, another trove of useful data.

Efficiency in Latin American universities, that is, the ratio between input and output within an educational institution, is low by almost any indicators one wishes to take: students per faculty, administrators and staff; percentage of funds allocated to non-personal categories of expenditure; faculty salaries; teaching loads; scientific output. The reasons pointed out by Winkler for this situation include: (a) the prevalence of political over performance criteria in academic governance; (b) the emphasis on university autonomy, which rejects policy directives from government; (c) the lack of a tradition of careers in university administration; and (d) a lack of norms on efficiency measures.

A deeper problem is that nobody knows what social benefits higher education can really bring, beyond the private gains of graduates. Winkler approaches this problem with the concept of 'external efficiency'. If it were possible to know how many medical doctors, engineers, sociologists and managers a society needs, it would be possible to compare the figures with what the education institutions produce, evaluate their efficiency in meeting the needs, and steer them in the proper direction. Manpower forecasts, however, are now in disrepute, and economists prefer to resort to estimations of 'rates of return', which is a comparison of earnings of degree hol-

ders with the costs of their education. If society is willing to pay a given amount for a professional's work, this could be taken as an estimate of how useful this work is. Educational efficiency could then be measured and improved by comparing the rates of return of higher with those of lower education, or the returns of one profession with those of another. Exercises of this kind show that returns of higher education in Latin America are higher than in other countries, but still lower than those of other levels, and seem to have been coming down in recent years, and that some professions pay substantially higher salaries and have more employment opportunities than others.

Is it possible to use this information to derive policy recommendations such as to redirect public investment from higher to lower educational levels, and from ill-paying to better paying fields and specialities? Besides its technical difficulties (Leslie, 1990), the problems with policies based on social rates of return are not very different from those coming from the now out-of-fashion manpower planning approach. Except under near pure market conditions, which are very far from what exists in Latin America, earnings obtained by different professional groups depend on a combination of professional privileges, market monopolies, legal benefits, corporatist arrangements and social biases that have little connection with the skills supplied by the specialist.

The thrust of the World Bank recommendations is to shift investments from higher to basic education, to charge tuition and to reduce the public sector's investments in higher education. Winkler's suggestions for improvement are more topical. They include: (a) the introduction of modern information management systems, to allow for the assessment of costs and productivity; (b) the introduction of performance criteria in allocation of resources among units within the universities; (c) the establishment of evaluation mechanisms; and (d) the training of university administrators in the use of these tools. Winkler does not discuss the reasons why these management tools have not been adopted more extensively. It is not a question of ignorance;

most universities have courses in administration and economics where these issues are taught. The answer lies in the contrast between Winkler's diagnosis, which is political and institutional, and the recommendations, which are technical and managerial. Is it possible to improve administrative efficiency without tackling the political and institutional issues?

Public universities are autonomous regarding governments; departments and schools are autonomous within the universities, and their priorities are seldom those of improving efficiency and performance. There are no incentives to improve internal efficiency in public or government financed institutions, and universities are no exception. Budgetary allocations are usually based on past expenditure, if not on political patronage, and money saved this year can mean a lower budget next time. Beyond some very gross indicators like students per faculty or articles published, there are no consensual indicators of what good performance really is. Does it mean teaching more students with a little less quality, fewer students with more quality, reducing the teaching load to allow time for research, or investing in useful technical assistance at the expense of academic publications? There are advocates and vested interests for each of these and many other alternatives. The establishment of evaluation procedures and the introduction of performance criteria in the internal allocation of resources would require to take sides on these issues, and could lead to painful conflicts between departments, teachers, researchers and students. Instead of in-fighting, why not try to come together and pressurize the government for more money? While it was possible to keep expanding the public budget, this strategy worked well. Now that the money is drying up, for many institutions it is still better to cut expenditure across the board than to make painful decisions on priorities and preferences.

Would a professional body of university administrators change the situation? Latin American public universities are typically governed by professors elected or appointed to administrative offices, and controlled by all kinds of collective bodies formed by delegates from professors of all

ranks, students and employees. They hold very different and often contradictory notions of the role of universities, what goals are worth pursuing and how priorities should be established. They go from small groups of research-minded scholars, who can only think of universities as places for scholarship, to many ill-trained and unionized full-time teachers, who see themselves as just another branch of the civil service; from students eager to get their degrees in prestigious fields and move on to high-paying careers, to those in the 'soft' and less prestigious fields, lacking the qualifications and professional perspectives of the former, and expressing their frustrations through collective agitation or anomic behaviour. They lack a common academic culture and ethos, which would accept what the goals of higher-education institutions should be. Good managers could hardly tip the power from these networks of widely contradictory interest groups towards the administration, and could not provide their institutions with the cultural traditions they lack.

The professional privileges and salary differentials granted to degree holders, discussed neither by Winkler nor Tedesco, are in themselves an important dimension of inequity in Latin American higher education. Winkler shows that access to higher education is socially biased – children from lower-income families are less likely to be admitted – and government subsidies benefit high income more than lower-income groups. This situation is particularly serious in Brazil, where private secondary schools function as filters selecting middle- and high-income students who later gain admission to wholly subsidized public universities. The inherent inequity of higher-education access was not perceived as a problem when social mobility was high and educational opportunities were increasing for everybody, but it has become evident now that the economy is stagnating, and that those who go up do so at the expense of others going down.

Now, as Tedesco says, it is impossible to continue to pretend that higher education is an unqualified boon to everybody. The income differentials obtained by university degree holders

came to be perceived as the product of social transfers, rather than the consequence of increased productivity. Public expenditure in higher education, which used to be considered good and self-evident investments in human capital, started to be seen as subsidies to private consumption and personal privilege. The issues of financing of higher education ought to be seen as political questions, linked to the social dispute over the appropriation of economic surplus, rather than as purely technical matters. Political considerations should not preclude efforts to devise financing mechanisms able to achieve the requisites of social equity, efficiency and reduction of public expenditure, and the educational usefulness of the money spent, but those considerations cannot be set aside (Tedesco, 1983, p. 19).

Modernization and reform

aa Contemporary attempts and proposals to improve the condition of Latin American universities have usually come from outside, whether piecemeal or comprehensive, through incentives or forceful imposition, and have seldom produced the expected results.

Incentives were typical of gentler times, when it was believed that better trained scholars, technical assistance and exchange programmes could do wonders. For many years, in the 1960s, the Universidad de Chile developed a comprehensive co-operative programme with the University of California, with support from the Ford Foundation. Large projects like this were rare, but thousands of students from Venezuela, Brazil and other countries went to get their advanced degrees in the United States and Europe, with money provided by national and foreign agencies. Most of these co-operation projects hoped to train students in the modern sciences and bring scientific research to Latin American universities. In Brazil, in the 1970s, millions of dollars were poured into the organization of a new tier of graduate education in public univer-

sities. In the 1960s and 1970s, research councils were created in most countries, and their money went usually to researchers in universities, allowing them to rise above the limitations of their institutions.

Thanks in part to these efforts, it was possible to form a sophisticated and modern scientific élite in many countries, and to develop a series of research institutions that strive to keep Latin America abreast with what is happening in the world of modern science and technology (Schwartzman, 1991). This was not enough, however, to affect higher education more profoundly, because Latin American universities were going through two contradictory modernization tendencies. One was in the direction of making them more scientific, more competent and internationally more up-to-date, and, in this sense, more élitist; the other was pulled by the expansion of enrolments, which would require a set of educational and pedagogic skills and priorities which were not in the minds of this élite. The better educated found it increasingly difficult to deal with their universities, and took refuge in their laboratories, research institutes, international networks, and even whole new institutions, leaving the broader problems of their universities untouched. To this relative failure should be added another, which was the inability of most scientific and technological research to contribute more effectively to the countries' social and economic needs. In consequence, there is today a feeling in some circles that Latin American countries should not really try to develop scientific competence, but put their resources to the service of more humble and pressing problems (Vessuri, 1990).

Comprehensive reforms have been unusual and often traumatic. The Brazilian reform of 1968 was carried out under a military government, which made it difficult to distinguish its political from its truly academic intentions. Its inspiration was the American research university. The old chair system was replaced by the department structure, together with American entities such as the credit system, the central institutes and the graduate programmes. In practice, the new system was superimposed on

the traditional one, and there was no provision to account for the expansion of demand which was already on its way. In 1985, with the military out of power, a national commission was created to reorganize the whole system. It was to be a democratic commission, representative of all political parties and interest groups. Incredibly, it managed to produce a coherent blueprint for reform, based on the recognition of institutional differentiation, the introduction of evaluation procedures and autonomy and increased accountability for results. None of it, however, was implemented (Schwartzman, 1988).

The Chilean reform of the 1980s was very different from anything ever tried in the region. Between 1973 to 1980 the Chilean universities were kept under military control, which led to the dismissal of about a quarter of its faculty and the closing of many departments in the social sciences and the humanities (Cox, 1989). In 1981 the military government started to implement a policy which was the opposite of that of Brazil in the 1960s. Instead of a single university model, differentiation; instead of trying to improve quality through graduate education and research, the introduction of market mechanisms; instead of the reliance on the traditional, public universities to set the pattern, the creation of new private, universities. Tuition was introduced in all institutions, government subsidies were given to a limited number of institutions, private or public, and competitive mechanisms were introduced to stimulate quality and efficiency.

The reform did not produce the expected results, but it would be naïve to dismiss it as just another nasty attack by the military against the academy. In 1991 the new civilian government in Chile established a national commission to set a policy for its higher-education sector, and, in its proposal, several innovations from the 1981 reforms were retained, among them the demarcation lines between universities, professional institutes and technical schools, mechanisms for competition and accountability, including indirect subsidies, and the principle that students who can should pay for their studies. The new project introduces a National University Coun-

cil responsible for supervising the whole system and to establish mechanisms for evaluation, accreditation and budget allocation, and there is a clear commitment to improving quality, assuring equity and stimulating the development of research and graduate education.

It is still too early to know what will happen with this project, which, as of this writing, is being submitted for approval to the Chilean Congress. If it succeeds, it can become an inspiration for other countries, showing that there is still hope for higher education in Latin America, and that the lost decade was not completely wasted, if it left the region with some lessons for the future.

The first lesson should be that no single model of higher-education institutions can account for the complexity of current needs and demands. The traditional Napoleonic model geared to certification for the liberal professions left little room for research, technical education, distance learning, continuous education, short-term vocational courses and liberal arts programmes. The indiscriminate adoption of the university research model may have helped to solve the first of these problems in some places, but made the others still more intractable. Whenever a single model is adopted, very often in the name of egalitarianism, a few institutions set the pace while the rest become just a series of fading shadows of a vanishing ideal. Differentiation is unavoidable, and it cannot be understood as just a series of strata in a ladder of social prestige.

The second lesson is that governments will be increasingly less able to maintain, supervise and care for the quality of higher education. There are many reasons for this, from budgetary restrictions to the impossibility of central bureaucracies to lead institutions driven by the spirit of initiative, involvement and enthusiasm of their members to set its goals and work for their fulfilment. Academic autonomy and decentralization are unavoidable, and they are likely to blur still further the dividing lines between private and public institutions, leading to a continuum going from proprietary, profit-making operations to publicly funded, national universities, with all gradations in between. A corollary for

content and institutional differentiation is the gradual development of a competitive market for higher education, both through actual competition for students and resources and the establishment of reliable and public mechanisms of evaluation and institutional accreditation.

The third lesson is that it would be naïve to expect Latin American higher-education institutions to make these changes on their own, but it would be still worse to pretend that these changes could be introduced through government imposition or management patches. With all its problems and limitations, higher-education institutions are still a repository of competent and motivated people, and no reform that begins by demoralizing them would have any chance of succeeding. The quandary is only apparent, since there are enough people in Latin American higher-education institutions aware of the current difficulties and needs, and willing to participate and co-operate in any well-conceived and academically legitimate reform project.

The fourth lesson is that the scientific, technological and educational competence that exists in the region's higher-education institutions is a precious asset, which should not be depleted in the name of narrow, pragmatic or egalitarian concerns. Good universities and competent scholars, scientists and technologists are essential for whatever Latin American countries hope to do in the future, in basic education, higher education and in other fields. There is not assurance, of course, that they will do what should be done, or succeed in their undertakings, and it is certain that they can do little alone by themselves. But the fifth, and probably more important lesson of the lost decade should be to reject the anti-intellectual, 'no-nonsense' attitude that have accompanied so many of the frustrated reforms and reform proposals of those years. ■

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